

Advent's Fire for Web
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
December 7, 2025
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Each Advent I begin with a quick trip through Jan Richardson's book: *Night Visions; searching the shadows of Advent and Christmas*. It's my Advent ritual - to be fully present for Advent and all it brings, I need to be reminded by Richardson's intro to Advent, in which she writes:¹

The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon
the likes of which we have never seen before ...
[Though, it's possible] to **not** see it, to miss it,
to turn just as it brushes past you.
And you begin to grasp what it was you missed,
like Moses in the cleft of the rock,
watching God's [back] fade in the distance.

So stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder.

There will be time enough for running.
For rushing. For worrying. For pushing.
For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon.

Last Sunday in his sermon, Craig Reynolds asked us to reflect. He gave us each a notebook to jot down our thoughts, and he gave us homework. He urged us to pay attention and note when something unexpected caught us off guard. To note moments that made us catch our breath. Both the light and the dark - because Jesus meets us wherever we are. Whatever we're feeling, experiencing. Light and dark are both parts of Advent's journey.

So, a glimpse of what's in my little Advent notebook:

a black crow strutting in the early inches of snowfall
the sound of the neighbor's rooster announcing the snow day
the way sound carries in the below freezing temperatures
our neighbor's growing Christmas light display
the quality of light at dusk,
and the startling sunsets in my rear-view mirror on the way home
the joy of shopping for our angel tree child, sponsored by our local veterinarian's annual angel tree project
the shock of reading a notice posted in the veterinary office waiting room

From an organization called "Not One More Vet." (NOM Vet)

The poster reads:²

We are all living and working in challenging times.

Let's support each other with compassion, kindness, patience, and recognition that each person is doing their best.

There are many challenges facing the veterinary community causing a workforce shortage from individuals leaving the field due to burnout or financial strain and sadly death by suicide.

In fact, 1 in 6 consider suicide at some point in their career—this is a much higher rate than that of the general population.

We are committed to making this a space safe

for the veterinary professionals who dedicate their lives

to the care of your animals. As such, we ask that you express any concerns you may have with the same respect you expect in return.

We do not tolerate yelling, name calling, threats, or disparaging remarks.

Be Gentle, Be Patient, Be Kind.

It saves lives.

I couldn't breathe. What kind of world are we living in, where we need to remind people to be decent human beings, in order to save the lives of professional caregivers?

There's more in my notebook, but you get the drift. Yes, there were moments this week that took my breath away, caught me off guard. Both the light and the darkness of this world. Advent meets me there, reminding me to take a deep breath in and out. To stop rushing, to pay attention, linger, ponder, reflect - and remember - something is on the horizon. God is breaking into the world, bringing hope, peace, joy, love - it's Advent.

In our Gospel from Matthew this morning we encounter John proclaiming in the wilderness.

He'd be something to note in our journals! John's a scraggly, odd loner, yelling in the middle of nowhere. But consider the specific details Matthew highlights: John's clothed in camel's hair and a leather belt - this is a new Elijah. And John's cries fulfill Isaiah's vision.³ He is the "voice in the wilderness" who ushers in the coming revelation of God's glory. Which "all people shall see ... together." (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Matthew's wants to make sure we get it - in John the Baptist God has raised up another Elijah who proclaims the coming of a new day - echoing Isaiah's vision of God's final redemption. And that vision is **breathtakingly broad**. All creatures — wolf and lamb, lion and calf, child and asp live together in peace. As we hear in our first lesson: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea."⁴

Specifically, John calls us to repent: to change our heart, change our life, and bear fruit for the coming of God's kingdom. And God's kingdom is inclusive of all people. John calls us to live into

God's redemptive love. Find restoration and liberation from whatever is holding us back from receiving the love and forgiveness of God.

Think about the wheat in our Gospel text - every grain of wheat has a husk, every grain needs to be separated from the chaff in order to bear fruit. We hear this again and again throughout the Gospels, that's how the wind and fire of the Spirit work - burning away what prevents us from living into abundant life. The purpose of the Spirit's wind and fire is not to destroy, but to sanctify, purify, challenge, restore and empower us.⁵

To share one more thing that captivated me this week - a poem by my new favorite poet, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

Her poem is called "In the Bleak Midwinter." ⁶

In the midst of cold,
past the fringes of darkness,
is this place of fire
where we huddle
at the edge of warmth
to relieve our chill
and regard each other's faces
in the glow,

where we learn stories
of the shadows
and meet our own
darkness.

Loneliness is, perhaps,
believing there is no room
for us in the circle.

Belonging is knowing
every one of us
is the flame.

Between this poem and John the Baptist's image of fire, I'm wondering what we might offer up to be burned away? The husks we protect ourselves with - self-absorption, or a fear of rejection. The chaff of our loneliness and isolation. I'm wondering what we would be better without. What we can let go of this Advent. Maybe that's our anxiety, our endless tasks, the unreasonable expectations, the tyranny of SHOULD that kidnaps our common sense and destroys our peace.

Friends, can we offer up our husks? So we can join the circle around the fire that warms and includes. So we can meet our own darkness - together. Remember - light and darkness are both part of Advent's journey, and God meets us in both.

In this second week of Advent our journaling homework now includes: 1) Paying attention to what God's doing, what captivates us. And: 2) noting the husks, the obstacles we've allowed to get in our way, and offering them to God. So we can make room for God's redemption in our lives. Allow ourselves to step into the circle of warmth and love and community, facing the light and darkness together and bearing fruit.

Beloved Ones, in the days ahead, may we be gentle, be patient, be kind. It saves lives, both others' and our own. May we live the good news of what Advent brings: hope, peace, joy, love. God's redemption for the whole world is on the horizon. Amen.

¹ Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions; searching the shadows of Advent and Christmas*. Gospeller press, 1998

² For more information about how you can support veterinary professionals, please visit:
nomv.org/about/pet-parents/

³ Change Your Mind: SALT's Commentary for Advent Week Two, posted on Dec 2, 2025, saltproject.org

⁴ Change Your Mind: SALT's Commentary for Advent Week Two, posted on Dec 2, 2025, saltproject.org

⁵ Change Your Mind: SALT's Commentary for Advent Week Two, posted on Dec 2, 2025, saltproject.org

⁶ Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer, In the Bleak Midwinter, posted on December 3, 2025

<https://ahundredfallingveils.com/2025/12/03/in-the-bleak-midwinter/>